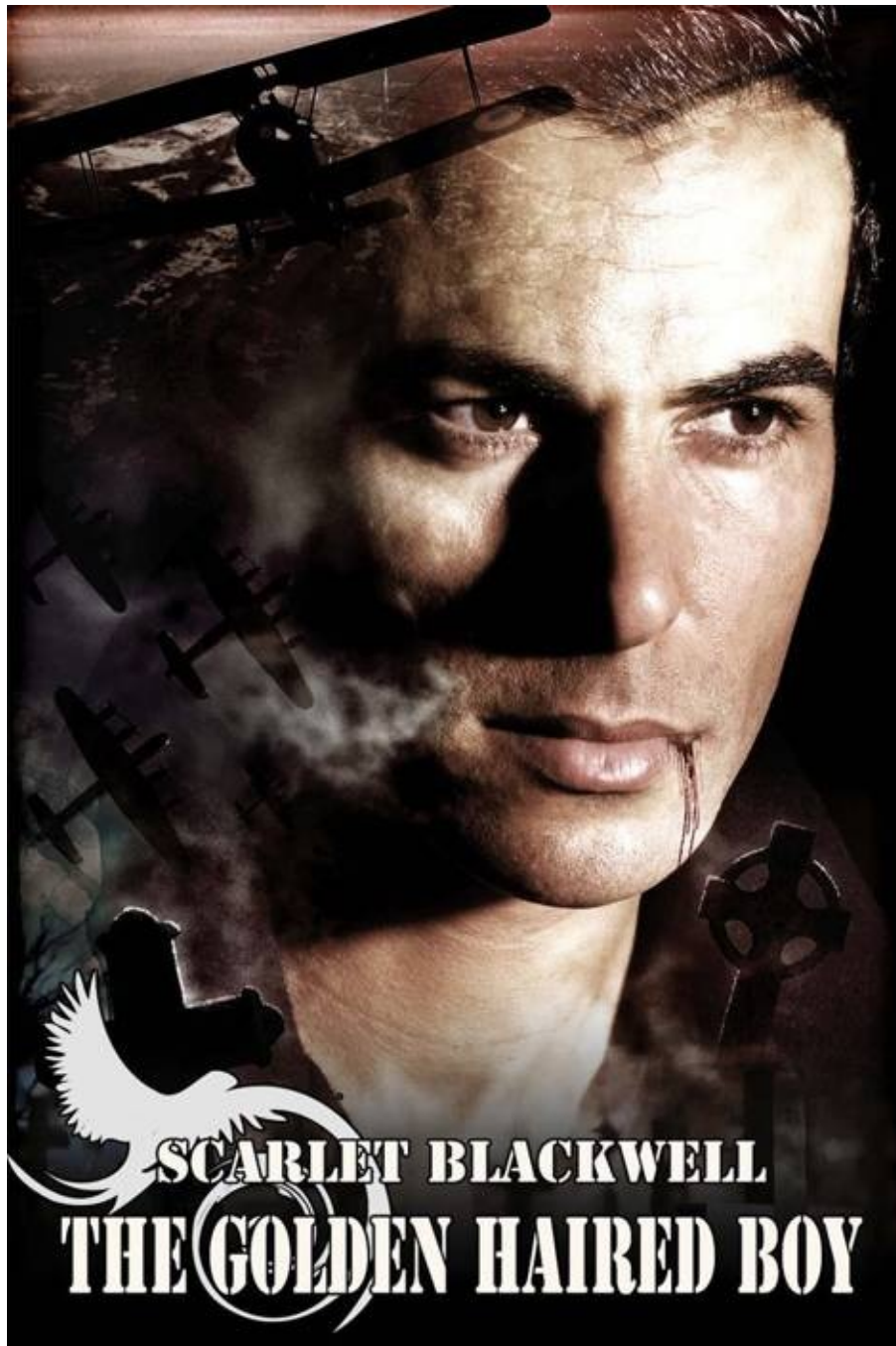


SCARLET BLACKWELL  
THE GOLDEN HAIRE D BOY



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The Golden Haired Boy

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*The Golden Haired Boy*

*by*

*Scarlet Blackwell*

"If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England."

~The Soldier by Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)

The Golden Haired Boy

**Chapter One**

1900

Spring, and the gaslights were being lit later than usual. The vampire Johann stood in the darkest shadows, watching the man complete his task and hurry over to the opposite side of the square. This was the second time in a month Johann had visited the university quad. He hadn't had any particular reason to be there the first time other than to feed, but he had more of one to be there the second.

The golden-haired boy who lived in room thirteen.

He'd taken a sip from a nice-looking girl of twenty or so and left her in the bushes behind the square, where she would wake in an hour with little more than a headache. Stepping out under the circle of a gaslight, he'd been startled by a boy hurrying past and drawn back like lightning. Wearing a blazer and carrying a satchel, he moved under the light's halo, and his hair shone like spun gold. His face was pale, his features fine, his lashes long and delicate, over eyes whose color was concealed by the shadows. Johann remained still until the boy had gone, then stepped out and followed him. He went in the direction of university accommodation, his shoes ringing on the cobblestones, then ascended a flight of stairs to the second floor. Johann, trailing behind, sprang up the stairs in one leap and arrived at the top just as his quarry let himself into an apartment, closing the door behind him without looking back.

Johann walked silently up to the door, noted the number, then retreated back to the university square.

It wasn't his intention to return to bite the golden-haired boy. Or maybe it had been—he wasn't sure. But Johann didn't do anything as indiscreet as killing. He'd learned his lesson in Vienna and Prague. No, surviving on sips from a few victims per day made his current stay in England much more harmonious. It was just that the boy had captured his imagination in a way no one had done for so long.

Johann couldn't get his beauty out of his mind. The golden hair, the porcelain

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skin. Cultivating attractions toward humans only ended in disaster and misery.

And the boy appeared barely eighteen. He should go. He hesitated at the corner of the square, undecided, and then shoes clicked against the cobblestones, and Johann drew back into his hiding place.

It was the same time, on the same day of the week, and there he was. He must have a late class on Mondays. He walked quickly again. Perhaps he was cold, or maybe the class was a bore and he was just eager to be back in his room. Johann's hand clutched a branch as the boy drew level, and his hair glowed like a halo.

Johann fought with himself, because he heard the human's heart beating and wanted a taste. Just a little one. He cursed himself for not feeding before he came. For arriving hungry and putting this boy at such risk.

The boy stopped suddenly, and barely five feet away, Johann held his breath.

The object of his attention peered into the shrubbery. His eyes were a pale, silvery blue. To Johann's heightened vampire vision, they were hypnotic, glittering jewels. Johann caught his scent in the still night air. The smell of his blood and manmade things, like soap and spicy cologne.

"Who's there?" The boy seemed to stare right at him. His voice was deep, belying his youthful looks, his accent southern, perhaps Southampton.

Johann's mouth filled with saliva. He could have sworn he felt his dead heart stir to life.

"Is there somebody there?" The boy sounded nervous, afraid. Johann wanted to reach out to him, reassure him, but he did not. He remained as still as a cat, not allowing himself to take what he desired.

The boy bit his pale lip, looked around, then hurried on, redoubling his swift pace. Johann stayed where he sat. He put his hand over his chest and expected to feel a hard thudding beneath his ribs. The boy with the golden hair had revived him.

\*\*\*

Johann was a model member of his small town community. He lived in a

townhouse on the outskirts and was pleasant to his neighbors, if reclusive. He 2

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raised his hat at ladies he saw on the street and politely declined invitations to visit clubs from the local gentlemen. He employed no staff, and his neighbors no doubt gossiped about a single man keeping house for himself and cooking his own food. In the locked room at the top of the house, Johann kept a coffin filled with Viennese earth, where he slumbered and could pretend he was still at home.

Not that he disliked England, with its sun in fits and starts and cold winters. Its climate was rather ideal for him. If it was overcast enough, he could actually venture outdoors during the day for short periods, providing he wore gloves and the brim of his hat shaded his face. It was risky, though. If the sun happened to peep from behind the clouds unexpectedly, he could expect to receive a nasty burn. He'd learned all this through trial and error, during his two hundred year life, and had caused himself damage and pain more times than he could remember. But he liked the daylight too much not to risk it. Liked to remember what it was like to be human.

A week after coming face-to-face with the golden-haired boy, Johann was still thinking about him. He resolved not to go back to the university, because sooner or later he would attract attention hanging around there.

Spring arrived, daffodils and snowdrops peeping through the winter-hard ground, and Johann rationed his daylight sojourns as the sun put in several appearances. He liked spring—the way everything which winter seemed to have killed was slowly reborn, new and stronger than before. The baby birds, the lambs in the fields, and the smell of rain on the revitalized earth.

Johann felt reborn himself. He had a focus for his thoughts and his attention and wished it were not so. He'd found it dangerous to let admiration grow, to let finer feelings take over his hard, abandoned emotions. He had to remember who he was. A creature that no longer had the luxury of feeling, who must remain alert to suspicion in the town and cover his tracks. Becoming softhearted would get him killed. Although, there were plenty of times when that would have appealed to him. It had been a long and lonely life, and Johann had wished an end to it more times than he could count.

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One grey, rainy day, Johann left his house, sheltered by his broad umbrella, and walked down to the river. He sat on a bench and watched a little girl and her mother feeding the ducks and swans, keeping an eye on the clouds for signs of shifting. There were hansom cabs to be hired on the road not far away, which should guarantee him a swift exit before he burst into flames.

Some geese arrived—raucous and taking control of the rations—chasing the other birds greedily away. Johann closed up his umbrella because the rain had tapered off to mere drips, and relaxed back against his bench. He felt peaceful today, even if he was still haunted by the image of the golden-haired boy. He was hungry, a sullen ache that muttered at him, but it was nothing which couldn't wait until nightfall.

A group of students made their way along the riverbank, chattering animatedly. Johann froze in place as one golden head stood out among a sea of dark hair. He bowed his head instantly, so his hat would obscure his face, irrationally convinced the boy would recognize him even though he was sure he had not been seen that night in the bushes. His blood seemed to pound in his veins and drum in his ears. Impossible. This was ridiculous. He couldn't hide like this, not when he needed to set his eyes on this beautiful creature again.

He lifted his head. The students stopped near the child and her mother. A couple of them pushed each other playfully toward the water. The golden-haired boy took a shiny, red apple from his satchel and polished it on his blazer. There was a flash of white teeth as he bit into the flesh with a crunch, which reverberated in Johann's sensitive ears. He said something to one of the other students as he chewed, and then nodded at the reply without smiling.

The group continued on their way, coming close to Johann. Did he dare make eye contact? Oh God, he had to. He felt as if his life depended on it. He kept his head up, his eyes fixed on the boy, and waited for the student to notice he was being looked at.

The boy noticed. His gaze drifted to Johann, idly swept over him, and then came back, fixed rigidly, staring. The hand, which had been about to bring the apple back to his mouth, remained hovering in the air. He blushed deeply, the 4

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rosy glow beautiful on his snowy skin. Johann didn't look away. His throat felt tight and closed. His fingertips tingled. These feelings of attraction were so unfamiliar to him that they distressed him rather than excited him. He didn't like the way his stomach seemed to lurch as if he would do that very human act of vomiting, or the way his hands became clammy when he didn't normally perspire.

He hadn't been wrong about the boy, though. He was as beautiful as Johann remembered from his two glimpses in the university quad. The jewel-like eyes glowed from the flushed skin. His features were delicate and measured, the cheekbones sculpted, the nose small and upturned. His mouth, while small, was full-lipped, but pale, almost without color. He was of good height, but not as tall as some of his friends. Perhaps about five eleven, his body was lean and well-proportioned.

One of the other students nudged him. The golden-haired boy looked away.

His dark-haired friend laughed, but sent a cold glance in Johann's direction.

The students passed by him and were gone. Johann's gaze followed the golden-haired boy. "Look back," he said, under his breath. "Please look back."

Johann could hypnotize some humans, but he didn't believe his magic could work at such distance, nor had he set out to deliberately bewitch the boy.

Nonetheless, he turned around and looked at Johann once more, the expression on his face intent and unreadable.

\*\*\*

Johann was possessed. He thought he saw the golden-haired boy everywhere he went. He dreamed of him while lying in his coffin during sunlit days. He smarted with remembrance as he thought of others loved and lost and unrequited



desire, and he vowed he would never approach the boy and make himself known.

Spring marched into full bloom, and Johann was relegated to the coffin during daylight hours. Perversely, he thirsted for the sun. He remembered its warm caress on his human skin, and swimming in Austrian lakes during endless summers. For the first time in ages, his skin ached for another's touch. His 5

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vampire skin prickled and burned as though the sun had possession of it. He imagined the press of another body beside him in the coffin, and it almost made him weep. There was only this. There would only ever be this.

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## **Chapter Two**

At twilight, Johann visited his favorite café for the first time in a month. He went there for the rich variety of music and liked the atmosphere, but the owner and her staff had gotten used to him and started to address him by name, and it made him nervous. It was wrong to cultivate human friendship, even if it was nice. The worst thing about it was being caught and denounced for his crimes and seeing the disappointment on the faces of those who had counted Johann as a friend. No, that had happened too many times before, and his life in England was going too smoothly to jeopardize it by becoming entangled in humans' lives. That included the boy with the golden hair.

Nonetheless, as Lorna greeted him warmly, he couldn't help his all-too-human feeling of contentment and gratitude in knowing he was not completely alone.

"Sit down here." Lorna pulled a chair out at a table by the window. She was a pleasantly plump woman with ruddy cheeks and unruly, grey hair who never questioned that Johann never ate, only drank. "Where have you been?" She put a hand on his shoulder, and he flinched at the unexpected touch.

"I had to go away on business," he replied, smiling.

Lorna shook her head and clicked her tongue. “We missed you. Your favorite string quartet performed last week, and we expected you to be here.”

Such were the disappointments of being a vampire. Johann loved music above all things. He hummed constantly and heard music in his head. He composed it on his piano. Missing his favorite performers at the café was a hard cross to bear.

“What is it tonight?” he asked.

“A troupe from Eastern Europe. Gypsies. Unusual music, but nice. Lots of instruments.”

Johann smiled. There wasn’t any music he didn’t like.

“The usual?”

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Johann nodded, and Lorna smiled at him warmly and went away. Johann could tolerate some other liquids as well as blood. Alcohol had the ability to intoxicate him rapidly though, not like when he was human. In the café, he usually drank brandy, but took his time, rationing it. Before now, intoxication had led to rash mistakes and killings. Alcohol was something to be respected and used wisely.

He glanced across the room and saw one of the waitresses, Emily, making her way over with a glass and a bottle. Emily was a beautiful lady of about twenty-four. Her hair was like flame, neatly pinned into a chignon, her eyes glowing amber, her delicate skin freckled and her figure like an hourglass. Other customers courted her, but she was reserved and didn’t flirt. She gave her best smiles to Johann, though; he would have been blind not to notice. Although he had been coming here occasionally for almost two years, they had hardly progressed beyond pleasantries involving the weather and comments on the music and the brandy. She was shy, but she was interested. Johann was careful around her. He couldn’t allow mistakes.

She put the bottle and the glass down on the table. “Good evening,” she said.

“We have a new brandy this week, from Czechoslovakia. It’s expensive. I hope you don’t mind.”

Johann shook his head. “Hello, Emily. Are you well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“And your parents?” Johann had met them several times when they came to the café. A nice, if reserved couple.

“They’re well. My mother has a slight chill, but nothing serious.”

“Send her my regards. And the band? I believe they’re something a little unusual.”

Emily smiled. “I think you’ll like them.” She knew by now that Johann liked anything with a rhythm.

“I hope so.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you, Emily.”

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Emily went off to the bar. When she got there, she gave Johann a whimsical look and disappeared into the back. Johann sighed and poured some brandy. He let the first swallow burn its way down his esophagus. Emily liked him too much.

If he wanted companionship and a steady supply of blood, he could do much worse. She was a fine catch. But although she appealed to him, she didn’t quite have the same effect on him as the boy with the golden hair.

Johann had never liked men until his death in 1700. Afterward, when he held men in his arms and drank their blood, he realized they were just as intoxicating as women. A human was a human, and in their many forms and guises, they all

attracted Johann.

He glanced around the café. At the bar, a doctor named Benjamin Bayfield, who lectured at the university, lifted his glass at Johann and smiled. Again, this was someone who was interested in him, but Johann was even more circumspect with a member of the same sex and did nothing to encourage him, although he found the doctor attractive.

His attention was drawn back to the little, raised stage. From behind the red velvet curtain could be heard footsteps and the scraping of chairs on the wooden floor. Johann took another swallow of brandy and waited with anticipation.

Soon, Lorna went to the front of the café and clapped her hands for attention.

She introduced the band, and the patrons applauded. The curtain rose on three men and one woman. All were dressed in brightly colored clothes and knee-high boots. One man sat down holding a cello, another man stood with a piano accordion. The third man had a violin. The woman stood among them with a tambourine. She wore a long, flowing purple skirt and a white blouse, with gold hoops in her ears and a red scarf in her long, black hair. There was something wild and untamed about her. Johann wondered if her blood would taste exotic and unusual. He had tasted gypsy blood before, in Transylvania, and he seemed to recall it had rather a nice bite.

The woman tapped her foot three times on the floor, and the band began to play. Johann fell instantly under the quartet's spell. They played lovelorn tunes of desire and despair, and the woman sang in Hungarian, which Johann understood. Every stroke of bow against quivering strings or stroke of fingertips 9

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on keys made Johann shudder as though touched by a lover's tender hands. The songs were wildly imaginative and dramatic. They ebbed and flowed to violent crescendos, and the woman wailed as if her heart were broken. During one piece, she threw herself to her knees and sang to the heavens, imploring God to bring back her lost love. Johann felt her every torment and passion as though it were his own, and he remembered once again those times when he had loved and lost, and his own present loneliness.

People got to their feet, applauding loudly, when the band finished. Johann kept to his chair and drank some more brandy to calm his shattered emotions. He felt wrung out and glanced around the café as though the other patrons might see his feelings revealed on his face, but no one paid him any attention. Only the cellist on the stage was staring at him, his swarthy face dark with distrust and something else—recognition.

Johann looked away. He told himself he'd imagined the look, and when he glanced back, the cellist was moving away toward a crowd of admirers at the bar, who plied the group with drinks.

Johann watched the band a while. His gaze lingered on the woman—he watched how her pale cheeks became flushed with wine and how she laughed when patrons of the café spoke to her, her teeth white and strong. She caught his eye and smiled at him, and he dipped his head quickly, embarrassed to be caught watching. When he looked up again, the cellist had hold of her arm and was remonstrating fiercely with her, gesturing across to Johann.

A rumble of warning went through him. It was time to leave. He finished the remaining brandy in his glass and stood, only realizing as he did that he had imbibed too much and was unsteady on his feet. Treading carefully, he negotiated his way between tables and approached Emily at the end of the bar opposite the band.

He fished some coins from his pocket and set them down, leaving a good tip.

“Thank you, Emily.”

“Leaving so soon, Johann? Isn't the brandy good?” She looked disappointed.

“It's too good—that's the trouble,” he replied with a smile.

Emily grinned. “Well, I hope you'll come back soon.”

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“I will,” Johann said, even though he knew he wouldn't. He inclined his head

politely and exited the café. Outside, he put on his hat and fastened up his frock coat against the chilly evening. He tried to put the unsettling glance of the cellist out of his mind, because he needed to feed on his way home. His wits were dulled with alcohol, though. He should have fed before coming to the café.

He went up the dark, little alleyway separating the café from the neighboring bank, weaving unsteadily between bins and crates. He was halfway up the alley, when the side door to the café opened and a familiar, hulking figure stepped out.

The cellist turned toward him, moonlight falling on his menacing face, and Johann's blood ran cold.

The cellist stepped closer to Johann. "I know what you are. *Nosferatu*."

Johann drew himself up. He was afraid, but he had to remember who was stronger. He could see no weapon on the dark man. "I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean." The cellist came closer. He reached into the pocket of his trousers and withdrew a knife, which he flicked open to reveal a long, sharp looking blade.

It wasn't a stake, and wasn't going to kill Johann, but still, he was vulnerable without a recent feed. The moonlight gleamed on the blade. It looked uncomfortably like silver, which would worsen the wound and poison his blood.

"What do you want? I have money." He reached into his breast pocket for his purse.

The cellist spat on the ground. He darted forward and Johann, slow with alcohol, wasn't quick enough. He lurched away, but the man caught him by the shoulder and drove the blade into his chest up to the hilt.

Johann gasped. He clutched at the man to try and stay upright, suddenly weak and disorientated, but the man withdrew the knife through severed muscle and tissue with sickening swiftness. He let go of Johann, pushing him back, and the vampire staggered and fell to the ground.

As the cellist leaned over him, breathing heavily, running footsteps sounded and

a voice split the night. “What are you doing?”

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Johann turned his head in confusion and saw a halo of gold approaching.

Perhaps he’d died and was mistakenly at the gates of heaven, about to be cast into the pit by the angels guarding them.

“Let him go!”

The cellist growled and straightened up. He darted into the shadows, leaving Johann lying on the cold ground. He put a hand to the spreading crimson patch on his chest, looking down at it in shock. It hurt so badly, there was no longer any question that the knife had been made of silver.

A figure loomed over him in the dark; once more he saw the golden halo shimmering in the moonlight, and suddenly he knew. He tried to speak, but couldn’t force the words past his dry lips.

“It’s all right,” the golden-haired boy said. He wrenched a silk cravat from around his neck, padded it into a thick square, and pressed it hard to Johann’s wound. His eyes were bleached of color by moonlight and shadows, silver and glittering.

Johann tried to get up. He needed to get back to his coffin, to rest and heal.

But to overcome the poisonous effect of the silver, he needed blood.

“Stay here,” the boy urged him, with a hand on his shoulder which scorched Johann through his clothes. “I can bring a doctor.”

Johann shook his head. He pushed the boy’s hand with its makeshift bandage away and dragged himself to his knees. The boy put an arm around his waist and helped Johann to his feet, almost lifting him, deceptively strong. Then he guided Johann down the alleyway, pressing his cravat back to the wound.

As they passed the side door to the café, a figure appeared, and Johann tensed in fear that the cellist's friends had come to find him. But no, he recognized the man as Benjamin Bayfield, and he in turn recognized both of them. "Lucas," he said, frowning, before his gaze moved with concern to Johann. "What's happened?"

And so Johann found out the name of the golden-haired boy, finally. *Lucas*.

How beautiful. He would have smiled, but for his pain.

"He's been stabbed," Lucas replied. "He's losing so much blood."

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Benjamin came around to the other side of Johann, and the two supported him between them. They came to the end of the alleyway, and Benjamin left Johann with Lucas to flag down a hansom.

Johann turned his head to look at Lucas, and their eyes met. He saw the recognition there. Lucas remembered him from that day at the river. "Let me go,"

he said in a low voice, so the doctor didn't overhear. "I will be all right."

Lucas frowned. "Sir, you have a serious wound. Who knows if your internal organs are affected? We need to take you to the hospital."

Johann shook his head. On no account could he allow people to examine him, to watch the knife wound shrink and heal before their very eyes. "You don't understand," he said, allowing a measure of mind control to leak from his eyes. "I heal well. I do not need medical treatment."

Lucas's gaze never wavered from his. Slowly, his eyes became a little glazed.

The scent of his blood was strong in Johann's nostrils. Hot, thick, and sweet as honey. Just a few sips would mend him. He bit at his lip, grazing it with one sharp canine so he tasted his own blood, and it almost sent him into a frenzy. He



brought one hand up to Lucas's mesmerized face, but his fingers hovered in thin air. He could not touch him. It was so wrong. That small contact would set them both on the path to ruin.

He pulled away with his last vestiges of strength, taking the bloodstained cravat with him, and ran down the street. Lucas called him back frantically, but Johann didn't stop. He darted into the pitch black park, stumbling over tree roots, despite his night vision. He scrambled to the other side, and the meandering path below the gas lamps and there, coming toward him, was salvation.

A man in hat and frock coat sauntered uncaring toward him, not suspecting his death waited in the trees. Johann didn't have the time to stalk or seduce. He was bleeding to death, poisoned, and he was desperate. He flew out, grabbed his quarry by the throat, and dragged him into the trees.

The man gave one cry and fought fiercely, lashing out with fists and boots until Johann thrust him against the tree trunk, exposed his throat with one hand, and bit him.

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The nectar exploded into his mouth like liquid fire. Never could Johann remember blood tasting this good. But when it was life or death, the crimson fluid always tasted better. The man slumped in his arms with a soft moan, as his victims always eventually did, and Johann held him up, embracing him as he drank.

The man's body was solid and muscular. He felt good in Johann's arms. The touch against him made his loneliness fade. He found himself imagining he held the golden-haired boy—Lucas. He remembered how quick Lucas was to stem the flow of blood with his cravat, the look of concern on the boy's face. How quickly that look would have changed when Lucas realized what Johann was. It was one of the reasons Johann kept himself away from humans. He didn't want to see himself as a monster in someone else's eyes.

His victim's heart rate was slowing. Johann had taken more than enough, and his

body glowed with the stolen blood. He withdrew his teeth from the wound and stepped back, lowering the man carefully to the ground, blood dribbling down his victim's neck to stain his shirt collar. He was still alive, but barely so.

Johann was angry with himself. If the man was found here, the police would be called. But there was nothing he could do. Revitalized and clear-headed, the lingering traces of silver still paining him, he hurried from the park.

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### **Chapter Three**

Johann awoke at twilight, still wearing his bloodstained clothes. In his hand, he clutched his rescuer's crumpled cravat. He fingered the silk delicately and then brought it to his nose. Below the scent of his own blood, he smelled the scent of Lucas. He shivered, his body heating. He needed to control himself. This fascination had to end. He pulled his frockcoat and shirt open and traced the knife wound with his fingertip. It was closed and healing, but an angry red around the edges. The silver. Even now, his chest throbbed where the knife had made contact with his tissues, polluting and poisoning. He had encountered silver before, but never had he thought he might actually die from it. He might have last night, if it wasn't for Lucas and the man in the park. Still, he regretted his indiscretion in running away from two witnesses who had seen him receive a potentially fatal wound and would next time see him healed and well. In the old days, he might have sought Benjamin and Lucas out and dispensed with them to keep their silence, but that wasn't an option anymore. Johann was enlightened now and didn't take life mindlessly. However, the cellist was another matter. He was a very real threat and *did* need to be taken care of, or Johann would have to run once more. And leave Lucas behind.

Johann cautiously left the house to feed after bathing and changing his clothes.

He kept his hat pulled low and avoided the gazes of passersby, half afraid there would be a torch-bearing mob out to hunt him.

He kept away from the park, instead taking a young lady in the trees by the river,

drinking just enough to take the edge off his thirst, leaving her still conscious but confused and disorientated. Then he found himself at the university quad. It wasn't his intention, but it was Monday night, the night Lucas was out late, the night Johann had seen him twice in the gaslight with his hair glowing like gold. Johann didn't have the strength to resist the pull of his feet toward the boy who was beginning to consume his every thought.

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He loitered in the bushes impatiently until he saw the glow of the golden hair under the gaslight and his hands became clammy. Lucas stopped opposite the bushes just like last time, peering intently toward Johann. Some humans knew they were being stalked. Evidently, Lucas was one of them.

"Who's there?" he asked just like the first time. "Is that you?"

Johann froze in shock. His nerve almost failed him. He longed to creep away but he could not. He had come this far and he ached for more. He stepped out of the bushes.

Lucas lurched back, clearly frightened. "It is you."

"It's me." Johann kept his distance, not wanting to scare Lucas away.

"Who are you?"

"Johann."

Lucas stared into his eyes for the longest time. "I saw you sustain a major wound, sir," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "Now, I see you in the best of health. Where did you obtain medical treatment?"

"I treated myself," Johann said. "I have some skill."

Lucas looked unsure. Clearly, he was suspicious, as he had every right to be.

He had seen Johann's blood loss with his own eyes. "Where are you from?"

“Austria.”

“Where in Austria?”

“Vienna.”

Lucas smiled shyly, showing pearly teeth. “I went to Vienna with my parents when I was little. I remember the Stephansdom and the Karlskirche.”

Johann returned the smile. Such reminiscences gave him a twinge of homesickness. “And how old are you now?”

“Eighteen. Nineteen, next Monday.”

Johann chanced another step closer. He drowned in the silvery-blue eyes of this fascinating human.

“You’ve been here before.” A statement, not a question.

Johann nodded.

“Why?”

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Johann hesitated. The truth was too frightening. How exactly would it paint him to Lucas?

“I...wanted to see you.” He stumbled over his words, suddenly as shy as Lucas.

Lucas bit his lip. His beautiful eyes were wide with fright. “I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do.”

The words hung in the air between them. Johann moved abruptly forward.

“Don’t.” Lucas put his hands up as though to defend himself from attack, flinching, his face chalk-white.

Johann was consumed with deep regret and hurt. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.” He couldn’t remember the last time he had said this to a human. Usually it would be a lie. Now he meant it more than he’d ever meant anything in his long life.

“Who are you?”

“Didn’t I already tell you?”

“*What* are you, Johann?”

His name on this boy’s lips made him shiver. Johann looked away from the intense gaze. He could not reveal his true nature and see the revulsion in Lucas’s eyes. It would break his dead heart. “Does it matter?” he asked.

“You scare me. Your eyes are like flames.”

That *had* been said before. Mortals had told him his eyes changed color with his mood. Right before he struck, they were blood red. “I mean you no harm—I promise you that.” How long was his pledge valid? How long could he resist his need?

Lucas’s head turned at the same time as Johann’s at the sound of footsteps. “I have to go,” Lucas said hurriedly, and drew away.

Johann gripped his arm lightly and felt Lucas stiffen all over. “Can I come back?” he asked fervently, gaze fixed on those pale eyes.

Lucas hesitated. “You shouldn’t.”

Johann’s spirits sank. He let go of Lucas and watched him rush across the square toward his room. He felt broken and beaten. As an anonymous student passed him, he shot out a hand and dragged the unsuspecting boy into the bushes.

Johann left England that spring and sailed for America. There, he set up a home in New York and did his best to remain anonymous. The city was a bustling hive where a foreigner didn't stand out the way he had in the small English town, and his life became less fraught and more relaxed. But he was tormented and heartbroken, rejected by the one human he had been drawn to in so long. He had to remember there would always be someone else. That surely at least one more time in his immortal life, he would love someone. But he doubted this would ever be reciprocated. What exactly was there to love about him?

He couldn't forget the English boy with the golden hair. He didn't *want* to forget him. He returned to England a year later. It was to be a brief stay, his passage booked to take him back a week later. He took rooms at the Kestrel Hotel in the town he once called his home, and when twilight descended, he set off for the university quad. The cherry blossoms were coming into bloom, and the air was perfumed with spring flowers.

He hadn't forgotten Lucas would be twenty today. Maybe Lucas wouldn't be coming back from a late class today, since it was his birthday, but Johann had a week to hang around the university in the hope of catching a glimpse of his obsession. This would be the last time, though. Once he had seen Lucas, he would put his desire to bed forever and never return to this green and pleasant land.

He sat on a bench this time, in full view of any passerby. He wouldn't skulk around Lucas anymore. Not now. He felt calm and resigned. He would not play the lovesick immortal anymore.

He waited until darkness started to fall and the man came around to light the gaslights, tipping his hat politely to him. A few minutes later, a golden-haired boy with a satchel entered the square.

"Hello, Lucas. Happy birthday."

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The Golden Haired Boy

Lucas froze in place like a startled rabbit. It took him a few seconds to compose

himself, but he did, remarkably. “Hello, Johann.” To Johann’s surprise, Lucas sat down beside him.

“I brought you something.” Johann took a box from his breast pocket and offered it to Lucas.

Looking astonished, Lucas took it. In the velvet-lined box lay a crucifix on a silver chain. In an act of selflessness, Johann had provided protection for Lucas, a guarantee that Johann would never get his hands on him. Ever. He had sat looking at the necklace at his home in New York, burning his fingers when he touched it.

Lucas drew the crucifix out. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I hope you wear it. Always.”

Something in his intense manner made Lucas frown. In a quick movement, before Johann could react, he let the chain swing toward Johann, the crucifix brushing his cheek and searing his skin.

Johann hissed, drew away, clapping a hand over his face, but Lucas had already seen the blister rising on the scorched flesh. “Oh, my God,” he whispered, standing up. “You’re what I thought you were. You bought me this to protect me from you.”

Johann bowed his head in shame. “You saved my life once, and I’ll never forget it,” he said, tears burning his eyes. “I wanted to say goodbye. That’s all.”

Lucas was silent. Johann rose to his feet. When he turned away, Lucas caught him by the wrist. The touch of his hand seemed to sear him the way the crucifix had. “Come back next year. In spring. I’ll still be here.”

Johann turned around, scanning the pale, silvery-blue eyes. The air felt close and tight, as if someone held him around the neck. “You dance with danger,” he told Lucas. “It would be better for you to send me away.”

“I don’t need to. I have this.” Lucas dangled the crucifix in front of him, and Johann looked away, the burn on his cheek smarting.

He smiled, despite his misery, and gently disentangled his wrist, their skin sliding apart. “Next year,” he murmured, disappearing into the bushes.

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## **Chapter Five**

Johann was still in New York the following year, and even by the end of February, he had not yet decided to revisit England. But, oh God, memories of Lucas ate him alive. He still maintained a solitary existence, and no other human disturbed his slumbering heart. Only Lucas. Sometimes it felt as if there would only ever be Lucas. He booked his passage, as he had always known he would.

The owner of the hotel, remarkably, remembered him from the year before and seemed delighted to have him back. He had the best suite of rooms at the back of the establishment, overlooking a long, sloping garden. Beyond that was a cemetery. Johann smiled wryly. How appropriate.

He left his hotel for the university at twilight and fed quickly in the park.

Entering the square at the same time the man came to light the lamps, he sat on the bench and waited.

Lucas arrived ten minutes later. He hurried into the square in great agitation, craning his head around the bushes, seeking, stopping when he saw Johann. He smiled slowly and shyly, and Johann trembled. “I’m sorry I’m late. I couldn’t get away.”

Johann smiled. “You’re not late. Happy birthday.” Lucas was twenty-one now.

Johann had to stop thinking of him as a boy.

“Did you bring me something?” Lucas blushed furiously. “Forgive my rudeness.”

Johann laughed. “Of course I did. Here.” He pulled the package from his inside pocket.



Lucas approached him timidly, taking the present. "It's a book," he said, feeling the spine.

"I knew you were clever," Johann replied.

Lucas sent him a mock-glare.

"I thought, being a student, you would be bookish."

"Oh, I'm very bookish."

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The Golden Haired Boy

"I hope you haven't read it, then."

Lucas fumbled the paper open and stood looking at a first edition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. He went several shades paler than normal. "This isn't funny," he snapped.

"It wasn't supposed to be," Johann said. Even when he bought the book, he had sensed it wouldn't go down well.

Lucas stared at the book for a moment longer then looked at Johann. "This is how I find out about your nature, is it?"

"Oh no," Johann said quickly. "It doesn't paint a good picture of vampires. I wouldn't want you to think..." he trailed off hopelessly. "It would be better if you made up your own mind about me."

Lucas sighed. He sank down on the bench next to Johann. "I haven't read it, because I was always too rational to believe in the supernatural. Now I know better." He turned his head, his eyes silver in the combination of gas and moonlight.

"I'm sorry."

"What are you apologizing for? For buying me the book, or for being you?"

Johann swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. He hung his head. Lucas, as always, made him feel ashamed to be what he was. He lurched to his feet. "I'm sorry I came."

"I wanted you to." Lucas rose as well. "Don't go."

"I must."

Lucas pulled him back hard by the arm. Johann turned in surprise, and suddenly they were chest to chest, almost nose to nose, so close he felt Lucas's breath on his face. Heat seemed to dance and shimmer between them. Johann felt intoxicated. He heard the hard beating of Lucas's heart and it almost undid him. The blood lust rose up so swift and shocking, he almost lost control. Maybe his eyes had turned blood red, because Lucas let go of him quickly. He reached beneath the collar of his stiff shirt and pulled a necklace free. Moonlight glinted on the silver crucifix, and Johann stumbled back, face averted. He deserved that.

"I'm glad you're wearing it," he said.

"I wish I didn't have to," Lucas murmured behind him.

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Scarlet Blackwell

The meaning was clear. Johann tried to order his thoughts, his mouth full of saliva and murder on his mind. Oh God, Lucas felt the same way. But Johann couldn't be trusted. If only he could separate the blood lust from...his other desire. He had never been able to do that. Not once in two hundred years. And so humans had paid the price. Any human who had ever wanted him. He was a monster.

He set off across the square without looking back, and Lucas didn't call to him.

The previous year he had stayed away from all his old haunts, not even visiting the café, but his heart ached for some music to soothe his battered, tormented soul. He entered the café and took a quiet table at the back, waiting for service. A woman played a violin mournfully on stage, its music utterly beautiful.

He smiled as he recognized Emily. She was older, her dress and hair more sophisticated, her belly rounded unmistakably with child.

“Johann!”

“Hello, Emily.”

“Where have you been?”

“I went to America.”

“We all missed you.”

*You* missed me, Johann thought, and this warmed him slightly. He glanced behind her because he had expected to be greeted by the bustling owner by now, but when he looked back at Emily, she was frowning and close to tears.

“Lorna’s dead. She died of scarlet fever at Christmas.”

Johann sighed. This was another reason he didn’t get close to humans. They were so fragile, their short lives snuffed out in an instant, leaving him with just another memory. Lorna had treated him well, and he was grateful. “I’m sorry, Emily.”

Emily gave a wan smile. “I’ll bring you your brandy.”

Johann gazed at the woman onstage. He caught her eye and smiled. He needed something to take his pain away that evening.

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The Golden Haired Boy

## **Chapter Six**

1903, and Johann had returned, despite all the promises he made himself. He and Lucas sat side by side on the bench in the glow of the lamplight. Lucas’s face was starting to lose its boyishness. His golden hair was severely slicked back with brilliantine, dulling its color, but increasing its luster. He grew more

beautiful with every passing year.

He was turning over and over in his hands the snow globe Johann had brought him from New York. It contained an angel in a white gown with a golden halo of hair holding a butterfly between his two delicate hands. Johann wasn't sure what to make of a vampire buying an angel as a gift, but when he looked into Lucas's eyes, he thought perhaps Lucas had made his own mind up what it meant. That Johann was to be Lucas's guardian angel. There was nothing more ridiculous. It was like a lion protecting a kitten.

Lucas smiled at him shyly. "This is the best present anyone has ever bought me."

Johann felt his face heat with blood. Such a human reaction that he didn't realize was still possible. He lowered his head. Thoughts of this moment had consumed him. He had half expected Lucas not to be here anymore; most bachelor's degrees took three years, so what was Lucas still doing here after four?

It was Johann's luck. Lucas might have disappeared without a trace, and Johann would have spent the rest of the mortal's life looking for him.

"What's your last name?" It was important to him to know at least this. In case, one day, he had to look for Lucas.

"Seymour."

"And what are you studying here?"

"Medicine."

Of course. "Where do you hope to work when you finish?"

"In London."

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For a moment Johann wondered if he could blend into the big city of London and live there near Lucas, keeping him close. How many times had he vowed to

give him up, and now these grand schemes came into play? What a fool he was. A dreamer, a romantic, an idiot. “So you’ll be here next year?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you from?”

“Southampton.”

“And your parents?”

“They still live there. I go home in the summer.”

Johann smiled gently. “That must be good.”

“It is,” Lucas replied earnestly, “but I like spring the best.”

Something clawed at Johann’s throat and stung his eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” He turned his face away.

“What did I say?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need.” Johann composed himself, folded his hands in his lap.

“You’re so sweet. Why do you let me continue to come here like this?”

Lucas took the longest time to reply. He looked down at the snow globe, and his mouth worked, then his tongue moistened his lips before his teeth bit the pale flesh, making it rosy with blood. “Because you do something to me.”

Johann looked at the long, fair lashes veiling the pale eyes. Then he looked at Lucas’s hand lying on the bench by his side. Johann moved his own fingers slightly, hesitantly. He stopped when they were inches apart. He couldn’t touch

Lucas unsolicited. He was too afraid. He was too ashamed of what he was to even dare.

He stood. "I must go. I'll see you next year. For the last time."

Lucas's head jerked up. "Don't say that." His hand closed tight around the snow globe.

Johann held his gaze for another moment before he turned and walked away.

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The Golden Haired Boy

## Chapter Seven

"Happy birthday, Lucas." Johann held out his gift. This time, his resolve was firm. This was Lucas's last spring at university and hence, their last meeting.

Lucas would go to London to work as a doctor. Johann would remain in New York until he was chased away or grew bored. He would forever seek something he would never find.

Lucas looked pale and drawn. His eyes had dark circles beneath them. His rather fragile beauty was all the more startling. He smiled half-heartedly as he pulled at the paper on his present.

It was another book, this time *The Raven and Other Poems*, by Edgar Allan Poe. "You have macabre taste in books, Johann," Lucas noted. But he fingered the pages lovingly, regardless.

"I know. I can't help it."

They were quiet a long moment, Johann looking up at the violet sky, listening to the birdsong growing silent.

"How old are you, Johann?"

"Two hundred and thirty-nine."

Lucas looked astonished. “Really?”

“Really.”

“So you died in...?”

“1700.”

He could see Lucas doing the math. “You were thirty-five?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look a day over thirty.”

Johann smiled.

“What’s it like?”

“What?”

“You know what.”

Johann sighed. He averted his gaze. “Lonely.”

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Scarlet Blackwell

“I’m sorry for you.” It was a whisper.

“I don’t want you to feel sorry for me,” Johann hissed. He still had some pride left, even though it was rapidly fading.

“I didn’t mean...” Lucas stopped. He got to his feet, paced a few feet across the square and came back. He stared down at Johann on the bench, his face hard, but his eyes anguished. “You’re right. This should be the last time. This is destructive.

*You* are destructive.”

Johann clenched his jaw hard, because it ached with the knot of tears building in his throat and his eyes. He nodded in agreement with Lucas's assessment.

Johann had no right to ask for anything from anyone. He was an abomination.

Lucas pushed his present into his satchel. He stood looking down at Johann for another long moment, and then he turned away, and with head bowed and feet dragging, he crossed the square, heading for his room.

Johann watched until he disappeared, and then he sat on the bench until the light faded completely, along with all his hopes and dreams.

\*\*\*

On Lucas's twenty-fourth birthday, Johann stalked the New York night, recklessly taking victim after victim, leaving some at death's door and others still conscious. No amount of blood seemed to sate him. That night he chose men. He held them in his arms while he drank and imagined they were Lucas, warm and pulsing with life. He spent the entire night looking for something he would never find. Something which was gone forever.

\*\*\*

The ghostly, pale vampire with the raven hair and the eyes of flame haunted Lucas. He thought of nothing else. His dreams were possessed by nothing else.

What was Johann to him? A creature Lucas had to wear a crucifix to protect himself from. He didn't know Johann; they were beings separated by humanity,

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and yet...a string seemed to attach his heart to the vampire's, pulled tauter with every passing year. Lucas could not explain the feelings in his breast.

How he woke from nightmares, drenched in sweat, desperate and thinking he saw the vampire, tall and silent, standing in the farthest shadows of the bedroom.

He still wore the crucifix. The snow globe stood on a bureau, the two books on a



shelf. It was strange not to receive a present this year, but then he had to remember Johann didn't know where he was anymore. Still, he had expected the vampire to track him down. To appear in London for his birthday. Perhaps Johann had finally gotten over his strange obsession. Perhaps another mortal had taken Lucas's place. The thought of Johann lavishing the same sort of intense attention on someone else made him want to weep.

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## **Chapter Eight**

Another year was all Johann could manage. The need tore at him with teeth and claws and threatened to drive him out of his mind. He sailed for England in spring, took rooms in the Great Western Royal Hotel, and made a list of all the hospitals in London before he set off by hansom cab. The day was cold and overcast, perfect for his skin.

Situated as he was in North West London, he tried St. Mary's in Paddington first, asking the staff if they knew Doctor Lucas Seymour. Coming up with a blank, he tried the Brentford Workhouse Infirmary in Isleworth and then the Ealing Cottage Hospital. He was downhearted. He had thirty hospitals and workhouse infirmaries on his list, but he was determined to look for Lucas as long as it took.

He crossed to the northeast side of London and started at the London Lock at Hyde Park Corner, followed by Leytonstone Infirmary and the Romford Isolation Hospital. He was met with a sea of blank faces everywhere he went. He stopped at a park and sank onto a bench, tired with walking and hungry. What if Lucas had never come to London? What if he worked somewhere at the other end of the country or worse still, some illness had stricken him, taken his life?

He made his way to St. Bartholomew's in Smithfield and coming up empty-handed once again, he tried The London Hospital in Whitechapel. After this, he thought as he entered the building, he would try Central London—the Hospital for Sick Children and the Royal Free, among others.

He stopped a nurse in a corridor, taking his hat off politely, and a shudder of

relief and excitement went through him when she smiled and said she knew Dr.

Seymour. But he wasn't at work that day. Johann employed mind control until she gave him the doctor's home address farther down the same road the hospital was located on.

Johann replaced his hat, thanked her, and left her to go away glassy-eyed to her business. He knew of Whitechapel. Jack the Ripper had been the talk of every 28

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country, not just Britain, during 1888, but Whitechapel didn't look as sinister as he had imagined during the day. The poverty was everywhere, though. Children wandering around barefoot, ragged beggars on every corner. Stinking piles of rubbish in the street. Jack London had written a book in 1902 after living on the streets of the East End, entitled, *The People of the Abyss*. Johann had seen it in bookstores in New York. He didn't need to read the book now, though. He saw the evidence with his own eyes.

He gave some children a few coins as he reached the house on Whitechapel High Street. The building looked presentable from the outside. Lucas might live in such a district, but Johann doubted he would be living in poverty like his patients.

At the door, his nerve deserted him. He crossed the road, stood watching from a distance as hansom drivers and pedestrians milled past him. He waited for the longest time, until the door opened. Johann saw the golden hair as Lucas stepped out, wearing a dapper suit and carrying a briefcase. No longer the boy.

Now twenty-five years old. Doctor Lucas Seymour. He was speaking to someone.

A woman stood in the doorway, petite, in a grey dress, her dark hair pulled back severely. Johann stared. She had her hand on Lucas's arm, and Lucas leaned forward, kissed her on the cheek, set off walking from the house.

Johann darted away. He veered off the street into an alleyway, dark and dingy, with rows of back gates creaking in the wind or hanging from their hinges. He held onto the wall, bent double, retching, and to his shock, blood flooded the

ground and liberally spattered his shoes. He sank back, sitting in the dirt, water wetting the seat of his pants, his own blood scorching his mouth. Oh God, oh God. Lucas had taken a wife. After everything Johann had thought he felt. How wrong he had been.

\*\*\*

Johann went to the hospital the next day. No matter his hurt and distress, he couldn't leave England without seeing Lucas. He knew his discovery would make it easier to finally say goodbye.

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He went inside and passed a message to a nurse, along with a wrapped present. A note asking Lucas to meet him outside, signed only, *A Friend*. The gift was an expensive stethoscope.

Lucas appeared within fifteen minutes, looking around, paling when he saw Johann there in the street. His face lit up hesitantly in a smile, though, as he came toward him. "Johann. Thank you for the present."

"Hello, Lucas." Johann made his tone cold.

Lucas studied his eyes a moment, frowning. "Why don't we go for tea?" he suggested, his voice a murmur. He put his hand on Johann's arm for just a moment, which Johann roughly shrugged off. They walked down the street, in the direction of Lucas's house. The sun was trying to peek from behind heavy clouds, and Johann pulled his hat lower, retrieved gloves from his pocket.

"What's the matter?" Lucas's voice was low and anxious.

Johann kept his head down as they walked. "You took a wife."

Lucas drew in a breath. They had reached his house. "Let's go inside. I need to speak to you."

Johann followed him in, taking off his gloves and hat. Lucas didn't remove hat

or coat before he turned to face Johann in the parlor, his face anguished, tears standing in his silvery eyes. “Johann, it was an arrangement between our two families from when we were small. I had an obligation. She’s not....”

Johann turned his face away, his heart hardened.

“Oh God, believe me, I beg of you.” Lucas clutched his arm with both hands.

Johann turned. He gripped Lucas by the shoulders, marched him across the room, and thrust him against the wall so hard a nearby etching fell down. Lucas gasped, and his hat fell off as Johann clutched his face hard in both hands, staring down into his eyes.

He felt Lucas trembling, their bodies pressed together. Tears streaked Lucas’s cheeks, and his pale lips grew ever more bloodless. The frightened pounding of his heart echoed in Johann’s ears.

“Please Johann.” His hands clutched at Johann’s coat.

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Johann closed his eyes a moment, as rage and jealousy conspired to drive him over the edge. He parted his lips as his canines lengthened and his mouth grew wet.

Lucas let out a cry as Johann stared him in the eyes, but he didn’t struggle. He only held Johann harder, and his head fell back, pale throat exposed. “I would never...I would never...” he babbled. “ Only know I’m yours.”

Johann bit his own lip and drew blood. Lucas seemed in a half-swoon, so Johann had to hold him up against the wall. The pulse at his exposed neck bounded wildly. Johann touched, stroked it with his finger, felt the life beating under the skin.

He bent his head, his body weak with need, pushing one thigh between Lucas’s. With lips an inch from Lucas’s neck, he breathed in the golden-haired boy’s scent, shuddering as the warmth of his skin made his mouth tingle.

Oh God. He needed.... He drew his hands down Lucas's back, stroking firmly through his coat, fingertips tracing muscle and bone, feeling the reciprocal shudder, a soft moan issuing between pale lips.

Then he saw the gleam of the silver chain below Lucas's stiff shirt collar. He still wore it.

A door banged from what seemed like a great distance away, his ears full with rushing blood as they were. Johann stepped back and caught Lucas in his arms as he fell, hurrying to drape him over the chaise longue.

The parlor door opened, and the dark-haired woman entered, great anxiety written on her face as she saw Johann standing over her husband.

"What...Lucas? Lucas?" She shook him by the shoulder, and his eyelids fluttered, but did not open. "Who are you?"

"I'm a colleague of your husband's from the hospital. I stopped by for tea, and he became unwell. It's nothing—he'll come around in a moment."

She stared at him a moment, clearly unsettled, and then directed her attention back to Lucas as he opened his eyes.

Johann stood back, watching silently over Mrs. Seymour's shoulder as remembrance flooded Lucas's eyes. He struggled to sit up, and his wife helped him.

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"I'm all right; it's too warm in here, that's all."

Johann felt permanently chilled, and the parlor, with fire unlit, seemed as cold as it was outside, but he stood silently, his gaze meeting Lucas's.

"I'll get you some water." Mrs. Seymour patted him on the head and darted a suspicious glare at Johann before she left the room.

Lucas swung his legs around and sat back against the chaise longue. He felt his neck with one hand.

“I didn’t,” Johann said in a murmur.

“I thought you might have done.”

“I never will. I swear to you, Lucas.”

“Leave now.”

Johann retrieved his hat from where it had fallen during their tussle. He straightened his wrinkled frockcoat. “Meet me tomorrow,” he said urgently.

Lucas glanced toward the door. Indecision warred with fear on his face.

“Tomorrow night at eight,” he said. “The Blind Beggar Pub, on Whitechapel Road.”

Johann hurried out of the room as Lucas’s wife returned. He tipped his hat and let himself out.

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## **Chapter Nine**

The sky had grown dark, the evening pleasantly warm, as Johann sat in the public house, waiting. Lucas was ten minutes late, and Johann’s hopes sank lower and lower every time he consulted his pocket watch. Lucas wouldn’t come. Why should he? Johann had put his hands on him unbidden. He had showed Lucas none of the tenderness and respect he felt for him. Instead, he had been rough and careless. He had threatened Lucas, lost control, inspired fear in the golden-haired boy he had worshipped for the past six years. He had always known the monster would surface eventually, no matter his honorable intentions. He was nothing but a beast in heart and mind, pretending at love when he knew not the first thing about it. Pretending he would not kill Lucas when it came down to it.

How he loathed himself.

He put a hand over his eyes, wishing to be away from the bustling pub and its rowdy patrons.

“Hello Johann.”

Johann’s head jerked up. He scanned Lucas’s pale eyes anxiously. “I’m glad you came.”

“I nearly didn’t.” Lucas took the seat opposite.

“I understand. You must permit me to make my apologies. For the way I touched you. The liberties I took.”

Lucas sighed, gaze focused on the table. “I frightened myself. The way I submitted to you.”

Johann swallowed. “Your wife...”

Lucas lifted his head. “Listen to me. My wife and I, we live separate lives. We are *separate*. Do you understand?”

“I saw you kiss her.”

Lucas sighed. “Oh, Johann, she is my childhood friend. I have great affection for her. I love her, but I’m not *in* love with her.” He gestured to a passing

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waitress, asking for cognac, then turned his attention back to Johann. “Don’t be jealous.”

Johann’s hand closed around his brandy glass. “I’m jealous of anyone you pass the time of day with on the street. Those people you speak to every day, when I see you once a year. Those who are mortal flesh and blood and can touch you just the way they want and the way you want...” He stopped, his face warm.

“Johann. Nobody touches me.” Lucas’s voice was earnest. He leaned over the

table. "If you wanted to...spend some time alone, there's a lodging house around the corner from here. It's clean and presentable." He flushed deeply, thanking the waitress as she set down his drink.

Johann stared at him. "Do you know what you ask?" And oh, the aching thrill deep in his blood, at the thought. The pull of deep desire, the need for satiation, both as a vampire and as a man. It was too much to even contemplate. Those forbidden thoughts had been locked away for so long.

Lucas bit his lip, toying with his glass, swirling the amber liquid around before taking a sip. "I've...saved myself. There will never be...anyone else. There is only you."

Johann's eyes slipped shut. He fought for calm. "Lucas. Oh, my love. If I was to...allow myself to...love you the way I want to."

"I want you," Lucas cut in, eyes bright and cheeks pink. "I will never *not* want you."

Johann got to his feet abruptly. He took his hat and weaved his way through the pub until he got into the blessedly-refreshing night air. A light drizzle fell, and he turned his face up, letting the rain fall onto it and the blood drain from his skin. He leaned against the wall, miserable and confused. Had Lucas really made that request? What was he thinking of, other than to give himself up like a lamb to the slaughter?

A hand caught his wrist. Lucas pressed Johann back into the wall, his body firm and warm. In the gaslight, he was ghostly white, his eyes bleached of color.

"I must spend some time alone with you. I must. Before you go away and I never know if I'll see you again. No matter if we just sit and drink tea. Just to be alone, unobserved. For me to speak with you privately. Just one time. Please."

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And just how did Johann control himself? He inclined his head in acquiescence and set off walking with Lucas in silence.



\*\*\*

While Lucas reclined on the bed with a cup containing the wine he had bought on the way, Johann sat stiffly in a chair across the room. This was impossible.

The hunger gnawed at his bones until he thought he would go insane. Did Lucas know how far away from losing control Johann actually was?

“So tell me you believe me about my wife, Johann,” Lucas said anxiously. “I need you to.”

Johann nodded. He kept his eyes averted, struggling to keep his teeth retracted as they threatened to burst desperately forward, unbidden.

“I missed you.”

Johann bit his lip hard, tasting his own blood.

Lucas sat up. He shuffled to the edge of the bed so he was facing Johann, an arm’s length away. “Can I touch you?”

Johann stared in shock. As he floundered for a response, Lucas reached out and put his hand over his.

Johann snatched it back. He stood up, pacing the small room, keeping his distance from Lucas. “I must go.”

“Not yet.” Lucas got up, too, following him. “Let me, just once.”

Johann was cornered against the door. “I say to you again, Lucas, you don’t know what you ask.”

“And you wouldn’t keep coming here if you didn’t want it, too.”

Johann let his head fall back with his eyes shut. “Oh God, Lucas. I desire you in sinful ways.”

Lucas stepped forward boldly, pinning him to the door. “And I you, Johann, and I you. I want to show you just how much I love you.”

Johann started. Had Lucas really said those words? He felt the warmth of his body and Lucas's breath on his face, a moment before Lucas tried to kiss him.

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With a groan like a damned soul in eternal torment, Johann pushed him back. He wrenched the door open and fled from the room.

Outside, Johann ran as though for his life—his mouth filled with saliva, his blood pooling heavily, thickly, with desire, a pulse of need beating through his body. “Oh God, oh God,” he moaned out, darting into the nearest park, looking back, praying Lucas would not follow.

He took a young woman there with no finesse, holding her to a tree while he drank her life. Her body was voluptuous beneath her tightly-laced corset, and her blood was heady with alcohol. She sighed softly, her eyelids fluttering, her tiny hands clutching at his broad shoulders.

When he let her go, he realized too late his lack of control. Her lifeless body slithered to the ground, and Johann cried out. He stood with arms raised and screamed to God to smite him down for the horror he was. He stumbled through the trees, weeping bloody tears, which stained his shirt collar and his hands, and then he stopped at the edge of a clearing, looking up at the sky.

It grew purple and pink with the coming dawn, clouds and streaks of color drawn over it as though by the finest artist. Coldly and deliberately, Johann sat down on the grass. He took his hat off. He removed his frock coat and pillowed it under his head as he lay down. Stretched out ready to sunbathe, he closed his eyelids. Behind them, he saw Lucas.

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## **Chapter Ten**

Johann came back to agonizing consciousness at the sound of screams. He

opened his eyes, blinking as the sun seared his retinas, and saw dark shapes of a crowd gathered, a woman at the front screaming hysterically as she looked upon him. At the same moment Johann tried to lift his head, the pain invaded every nerve ending of his body. He realized he had gotten his wish and was being burned alive. His sharp ears deciphered the conversations around him.

“Someone’s set him on fire.”

“He’s charred all over.”

“What are we going to do with him? He’s never going to survive. We would do better to put him out of his misery.”

Johann tried to turn his head to this last voice. He tried to speak, but his voice was gone. “An axe,” he mouthed, seeking eye contact with the man who had spoken, but his vision was dark. “Strike my head from my body.”

“He’s trying to talk.”

“There’s a policeman here.”

“I’ve got a blanket. Come on, let’s lift him up and take him to the hospital, poor creature.”

Johann was hoisted roughly in the air by what felt like dozens of hands, and he cried out at the exquisite pain of being handled. Nearby, a woman was sobbing.

His head hung down as he was carried away, and he saw her face through half-blind eyes. *Don’t cry for me*, he wanted to say, *and please don’t try to save me*.

He tried to fight the hands carrying him. He tried to beg to be left there in the sun because, oh God, his death was tantalizingly close. So close he could almost taste it. But his words came out as silent whispers, and his pain overwhelmed him, burning through every nerve and fiber of his body, so his consciousness became one big scream of agony. His last thought was, take it away. Somebody please, take it away.

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“It’s a man in his thirties. Horrifically burned, third-degree all over, like someone took a match to him. The nurses are bathing him. I don’t know how the poor wretch has survived this long.” Lucas’s senior, Edward Sims briefed him as they walked quickly down the corridor.

Even before they entered the room, Lucas smelled the charred skin, the stench of burned flesh, and his stomach contracted as he stepped inside and saw the half-dressed man lying unconscious in a bath of cold water.

Lucas stumbled away. He vomited violently in a bucket against the wall.

Edward’s hand settled on his shoulder; he was not a man of sentiment. “Pull yourself together.”

Lucas stood up, covered in clammy sweat, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief. *Oh Johann, oh God, Johann.* He turned to the nearest nurse. “Ten milligrams of diamorphine, immediately. Don’t attempt to touch him again until he’s had that.”

Two nurses hurried to get the drug. Lucas slumped against the wall, allowing reluctant eyes to gaze upon Johann’s face. It was barely recognizable among layers of black and blistered red, the thick lashes of the eyes burned away, the lips drawn back over the pearly white teeth. Lucas sank into a chair.

Edward stood over Johann, looking at the exposed skin. Johann’s waistcoat had been cut away with scissors, but his shirt was stuck to his body in places, as were his trousers. Edward put on an apron and gloves. When the nurses came back, he took the syringe and with a nurse’s help to bring the arm from the bath, he injected its contents.

He straightened up and took the scissors. “Let us begin.” He looked pointedly at Lucas, who reluctantly moved forward, washing his hands at the sink before donning an apron and gloves.

Edward attempted to peel the shirt from Johann’s torso while the nurse poured

cold water over the skin. Lucas and another nurse removed Johann's shoes and cut his socks from him. They cut the pants from his legs, leaving only his underwear. Lucas stopped here. How disrespectful of him to see Johann 38

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naked this way, without his permission. He looked at the exposed black and red skin and imagined what a fine body the vampire would have once had, so muscular and lithe, so pleasing to the eye.

The nurse didn't have his sensitivities. She cut the underwear from Johann briskly, and her colleague helped her remove it. They used jugs to pour icy water over his body.

Lucas stepped back, gaze averted.

Edward discarded his apron and gloves. "I'll leave you to it," he said, leaving the room.

"Bandage him," Lucas directed the nurses. "Have him brought down to the basement."

The basement beds were reserved for infectious patients and those who needed to be isolated for other reasons, and the nurses didn't question him. They probably presumed Lucas was keeping Johann segregated for a peaceful death away from the staring eyes of other patients. Lucas took off his apron and gloves and washed his hands before he left the room. He went directly to the empty doctors' lounge and sat, gazing unseeingly from the window, with the taste of bile bitter in his mouth.

Had Johann tried to kill himself? What other explanation could there be?

Lucas didn't know how long it would take for the sun to inflict such devastating, widespread burns, but Johann was an old and experienced vampire who had avoided this fate for long enough. There could be no line of reasoning other than Johann had let it happen deliberately.

Lucas moaned softly, arms around himself, rocking slowly in the chair. His heart was broken apart. He wept for Johann, for his pain, for his disfigurement, and he

prayed to God that his death would be swift. That he would suffer no longer. Then he straightened up and thought—could Johann survive this? It didn't seem possible, but Lucas had to remember what Johann was and also that he himself had the cure at his disposal—not bandages and drugs, but blood.

Could the rejuvenating properties of blood be enough to save such a seriously ill vampire? It hardly seemed possible, and Lucas fought with himself over whether to try. Wouldn't it be better to dose Johann so heavily with morphine that he 39

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slowly slipped away, without waking to excruciating pain the likes of which Lucas could only guess? But who said the drug worked on vampires? Certainly Johann hadn't awakened during the removal of his clothes, but that didn't mean the drug was responsible.

He shuddered when he thought of how lucky he had been that Dr. Sims hadn't decided to take Johann's pulse, only to find it absent. Johann would have been declared dead and shipped off to the mortuary, and how would Lucas have explained that no, the vampire was already dead and heading for his actual, immortal death?

He sighed, wiping his wet face with his handkerchief and standing up. He had to be strong, even though he wanted to sit in a corner and weep for all he had lost.

Something he had never possessed in the first place. Weep for what he had driven Johann to do.

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When he entered the dark, cool basement, the screens had been placed around bed three at the end, and he made his way down, stepping past them. Johann, bandaged all over and lying motionless beneath a single sheet, was illuminated by dim light from the bedside table.

"There's another ten of diamorphine drawn up, should you wish to give it," one of the nurses told Lucas.

He held her gaze a moment and thought her meaning implicit. No one at the

hospital was in the habit of euthanizing patients, but when one suffered the way Johann did, measures were taken to make sure he left this world peacefully.

Lucas nodded. "Thank you both. You can go now."

"Don't you wish me to take his observations first?" the same nurse questioned.

Lucas shook his head. "I'll do it."

It was of course, unusual for a doctor to want to take his own observations, and Lucas had been behaving oddly from the start with this patient, starting with the highly out-of-character vomiting at the sight of Johann. He couldn't blame the  
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nurse for regarding him suspiciously for a moment before she and her colleague left, pulling the screens back.

Lucas pulled a chair up to the bed. He sat down and reached for Johann's bandaged hand, stopping short of touching him. "Johann," he whispered. "Give me a sign that you can hear me."

The eyelids fluttered. The lips moved in the bandaged face. A moment later, Lucas saw the flame-like eyes of the vampire. His head turned, and Johann's gaze focused clearly on his.

Lucas stifled a sob. "Johann."

He saw remembrance flood the vampire's eyes. Johann closed them and turned his head away. His voice was a low rasp when he spoke. "Let me go. I beg you."

"Oh God." Lucas's head fell onto the bed, and he clutched at Johann's hand, heedless of the pain it might cause. "Tell me I didn't drive you to this, please, I implore you."

Johann hissed and tried to withdraw his hand. Lucas let go guiltily. He sat staring at Johann and waiting for the vampire to speak.

Johann's blistered lips moved, but he made no sound. "Please," Lucas said.

"Tell me what to do. I'll do anything for you Johann, anything."

Again, the flame-like eyes met his. "How I hate for you to see me this way.

Please, if you want to help me, take me back to the sun. It won't take too long."

"No, no..." Lucas wept. He stood up, leaning over Johann, face close to his, wanting to touch so much, knowing he couldn't.

"Please, if you love me."

Lucas recoiled. "Oh, you know I do, and how wicked you are for playing upon it," he said fiercely. "Because I love you, I can't see you suffer. I can give you drugs to put you out of your misery, but I won't torture you further by taking you back to the sun."

Johann closed his eyes again. "The pain is like a thousand-million scrapes of jagged glass against my skin," he whispered. "But still it's not equal to the pain of never being able to have you."

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"You can have me!" Lucas cried. "You can have me any way you want, I swear to God, as long as you go on living. For me."

The flame eyes seemed to glow. "Don't promise yourself to me, Lucas. You know not what you do."

"I *do* know what I do. I say again, I'm yours—you can have me. Only, allow me to heal you."

Johann swallowed audibly. His mouth trembled.

Lucas took up the syringe. "Does morphine work for you?"

"Yes."



Lucas reached for some gloves. He unraveled the bandage around the crook of Johann's elbow, just enough to reach the vein. "This is diamorphine, twice as strong. It will numb your pain." Johann shook his head, and Lucas understood that to mean nothing would ever numb his pain. Not that which Lucas caused him. How he loathed and despised himself. He gave Johann the full syringe, wrapped the bandages gently back around him and then sat and watched as the flame eyes rolled and then closed.

"I will heal you, Johann," he said in a whisper. "I swear to you. And when I do, I will be yours. To do with as you will."

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## **Chapter Eleven**

It was nighttime when Lucas returned, having given instructions to the nurses that he alone would tend the patient in bed three. The blood he carried in a cup was warm and fresh. He drew the screens around and put the cup on the bedside table.

Johann slumbered, his bandages stained with leaking fluids. Another syringe of diamorphine sat ready. Lucas administered it without asking. Then he climbed onto the bed and lifted the limp body tortuously into his arms. He held Johann cradled in his lap, back to Lucas's chest, with the vampire's head resting on one of his shoulders, the way he had always wanted. Never would he have thought, though, that the first time he touched Johann would be this way.

The dark hair protruded from the bandages around Johann's face, even the scalp burned, and Lucas stroked it gently. He whispered into Johann's ear.

"Johann. I need you to drink."

Johann's eyes opened. "No, you mustn't." His voice was still a hoarse rasp, his accent thick.

"This is the way to heal you Johann. I know it will work." Lucas put the cup to

Johann's lips and tilted it.

Johann groaned as the blood filled his mouth and ran down his chin, staining the bandages. He choked as he gulped, and Lucas drew the cup back regretfully.

The way to heal Johann was not to force feed him this way. He mopped Johann's lips with a cloth. His lips touched one burned ear gently. "Please. For me."

Johann trembled in his arms. His mouth sought the cup again, and Lucas gave it willingly, tipping it slowly as Johann swallowed.

Steadily, the vampire took the blood until the cup was empty, and Lucas watched with his heart beating pitifully fast, thudding against Johann's back.

Johann finished and laid his head back against Lucas's shoulder, eyes closed, licking at his lips. "I feel your heart."

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"It beats only for you. It always will." Lucas stroked his hair, looking down into Johann's face.

The vampire's expression contorted as though in excruciating agony. A moment later, drops of crimson slid from beneath his naked eyelids.

Lucas caught his breath. Johann's shoulders shook. Lucas put a finger out, catching one blood tear. He put it to his mouth, tasting the coppery essence. Then he wrapped Johann in his arms and rocked him gently until the vampire slept.

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The basement was dark at all hours of the day, so Johann didn't know whether it was morning or night when he awoke. The pain still clawed at him, but it was muted, nothing like that first flash of white-hot fire when he had come to consciousness in the park. He turned his head. Lucas was gone, and screens were drawn around his bed. How was Lucas going to explain to the other staff when

his burns started to heal? How was he going to explain it when Johann didn't die as any mortal man with these injuries would? Oh God, he had taken the blood Lucas had offered against his will. Still, he wanted to die, no matter that Lucas had made that stupid vow to be his, if Johann lived.

Lucas could never be his. It would mean his death, and Johann would not kill the one he valued above all else. He would not condemn him to this sort of immortal hell.

He lay drifting in and out of consciousness and told himself that next time he would refuse the blood. But when he next awoke, he was propped up in Lucas's arms once more, and the blood was in his mouth before he could protest. And he drank. How he drank. He drained the cup dry and panted for breath afterward, his veins singing in joy. As he lay there in a half-swoon of ecstasy, he imagined, for one brief moment, that the blood had come from Lucas himself.

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## **Chapter Twelve**

Johann counted the passing hours by the arrival and departure of Lucas. His doctor brought him blood twice a day and sat beside him at other times, sometimes changing his bandages and looking at the skin beneath.

Johann knew his skin was renewing itself. The pain grew less with each cup of blood he drank. He was able to move more freely on the bed, and his thoughts became more lucid. He was putting Lucas at terrible risk. No nurses had tended him, Lucas taking the roles of both doctor and nurse, and surely people were suspicious about this burned man lying hidden away in the dark.

Johann estimated it had been five days since his injury, when he sat up in bed for the first time, drew back the covers, and put his legs over the edge. Starting with the lower half of his body, he unwrapped his bandages. The skin underneath was new and pink and healthy in places. It pained him very slightly when the dressings stuck in some areas, but Johann persevered until he had unwrapped himself entirely.

He had just finished his face, when the screen twitched back, and Johann tensed on the edge of the bed.

Lucas gasped, blanching. “What are you doing?”

Johann didn’t miss the way Lucas’s gaze slid down his naked form. He pulled a sheet over himself. “I’m leaving. You must help me find some clothes.”

“You’re not ready. You need to recover some more.” He moved forward, hands out as though to stop Johann as he rose from the bed, holding the sheet around himself.

“I must go. We are both at risk.”

“No. You’re safe here.” Lucas placed his hands on Johann’s bare shoulders and he quivered at his touch. He tried to brush Lucas aside, but the doctor held on, sidestepping with him, blocking his way. “Please, Johann.”

Their eyes met and a fever danced through Johann’s veins. With sudden strength, he pulled Lucas around, pushed him down on the bed, and pinned him 45

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there. Lucas cried out once, but Johann smothered it with one hand while his other hand wrenched open Lucas’s stiff collar, baring his throat.

He saw the fear in Lucas’s eyes, and the desire, before he sank his fangs into the virgin skin, piercing the flesh and drawing the nectar from within.

Lucas bucked up beneath him, his body undulating sensually, soft moans falling from his lips, and Johann crushed him down further, their limbs entwined like the lovers they would never be, as Lucas’s life flooded his mouth.

It was as Johann had always imagined in his darkest dreams. He had always known that the blood of the one he loved would be the sweetest, heaviest, and most guilty pleasure imaginable. The fluid invaded all his senses, setting them ablaze, as he danced along a line of ecstasy so great, it was almost painful. All the while Lucas clung to him, holding hard, like he would never let Johann go, while the vampire gave himself precious seconds to savor this for the first and

only time.

No more.

Johann pulled himself away, swallowing the last mouthful, kneeling above Lucas. He was semiconscious, head still thrown back in submission, and oh God, how easy it would have been to have the rest, to take what Lucas was freely offering.

Johann turned away, fists clenched, fighting the inner monster which demanded every drop and more. This was it. This was the end of him and Lucas, and somehow Johann had held back and not made it the tragedy he had always expected. The only tragedy now was both their broken hearts. Forever apart.

He undressed Lucas quickly, with hands which he forced not to linger, covering each bit of flesh with the sheet as soon as he had uncovered it, not allowing himself to look upon his love naked. That would be his punishment.

He dressed in Lucas's clothes, the pants and cuffs too short, and left Lucas lying in bed, covered up to the throat.

Johann leaned over him one last time. "Forgive me."

Lucas's long lashes fluttered. "Always," he said, voice weak and words slurred.

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Johann hesitated with mouth almost over his. No, that would be his punishment too, for what he had done to Lucas. To never know his kiss. He pushed the screens aside and hurried from the basement.

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It was on the long journey back to New York that Johann finally recovered his strength. His supply of blood stolen from the hospital lasted the first two days, and then after that, he ventured out at night. A mysterious lethargy spread over the passengers, which was accompanied by marks to the neck, which were

presumed to be mosquito bites.

The strangest thing about the illness was that all the victims were young men with golden hair.

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## **Chapter Thirteen**

The melancholy which overtook Johann every spring from then on almost drove him back to the brink again. Too many times to count, he lay himself deliberately down in the sun, only to drag himself to safety before too much damage was done. It was not a swift death, he knew as much now, and he could not bear to suffer the lingering agony without Lucas by his side.

He looked upon himself as a coward and despised himself for what he had done to Lucas. Finally committed that most taboo sin, wrapped in the guise of saying goodbye.

But when he held golden-haired men to him in that most intimate embrace, he remembered Lucas beneath him. He remembered his love's so obvious arousal, and he ached to take what he would never have.

He didn't go back to England. His strength at staying away was his cowardice, too. The decade ended, time marched on and Johann counted Lucas's advancing years every spring. He bought Lucas a present each year, but never sent it. The gifts were stored in a box in his attic, next to his coffin. Sometimes he drew out the trinkets and objects he'd bought Lucas and held one of them in his hand while he slept. Often he breathed Lucas's name as he held a man in his arms, just before he struck. None of them were ever conscious enough afterward to ask him who Lucas was.

And then the unthinkable happened. War broke out. It was 1914, and after the Sarajevo assassination of the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, things became a bit tense in Europe. Johann read the papers, but didn't take much notice of the conflict, even though it involved his own country. He was too far away to be interested, and too estranged from Austria. He sat up and took notice

though, when Germany invaded Belgium and Britain declared war on Germany.

He was stricken with fear and anxiety. There was no compulsory conscription in Britain, but that didn't mean Lucas wouldn't sign up. Young men were rushing  
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to volunteer, and a million men had enlisted by January 1915. Perhaps Lucas would want to join, to lend his medical skills to the injured.

Johann remained in New York, paralyzed with terror, as the United States remained neutral and one bloodbath after another took place on French soil. He wrote one terse letter to Lucas in London, begging him for reassurance that he was still safe at home, but received no reply. This lack of response tortured him.

He didn't know whether Lucas was alive or dead, but he was too afraid to return to England and see him once again.

And then Britain began to conscript. First it was single men, and never before was Johann relieved that Lucas was married, but four months later, it was married men, too.

Johann booked passage for England despite the fact that a passenger liner had been sunk in the Atlantic a year previously by a German U-boat. Death by drowning was not one of the ways to dispatch him.

He arrived in England in the last week of June 1916 and traveled up to London from Southampton. Taking rooms at a hotel in Covent Garden, he made his way on foot to Lucas's home on Whitechapel High Street. He stood and knocked, hat pulled low over his eyes, already feeling the effects of the midday summer sun.

It was Lucas's wife who answered, and Johann felt both a surge of relief that Lucas still maintained this address and distress at seeing Mrs. Seymour.

She looked at him curiously. "I know you, don't I?" She looked pale and drawn.

Johann already had his answer, without asking.

He bowed his head, removing his hat and wincing as the sun fell on his face.

“My name is Johann Brandauer. I’m a former colleague of your husband’s. We met some years ago, you may recall. I’ve been travelling; I wanted to catch up with him.”

Her dark eyes were stony. “My husband isn’t here. He’s in France. You may be aware there’s a war on.” Her tone was sarcastic, cold.

Johann wondered later if she saw his face crumble, the obvious distress he could not hold back. He put a hand over his mouth, turned it into a cough, averted his face, fighting not to let blood tears come cascading down it.

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“Forgive me. Do you know where in France?” His voice was strangled, not his own.

“Why, does my husband mean that much to you that you intend to go and find him?”

Johann lifted his head and fixed piercing eyes on her. “Yes, Mrs. Seymour.”

She was taken aback and deeply unsettled by his answer, he saw. She hesitated, stumbled over her words, searching his eyes. “Who are you?”

“As I said, a friend. I precede you by some years.”

She stared at him, and then breathed out, “Oh, I know you. You’re the one, aren’t you? You’re the one who haunts Lucas’s dreams. You’re the reason my husband doesn’t belong to me.”

Johann didn’t speak. He merely kept his gaze on hers. She put a handkerchief to her face suddenly, hiding her eyes. From behind it, she said, “He’s in the Picardie region in the north. Somewhere around the Somme River.”

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### Chapter Fourteen

Johann alighted at Calais. How to find one needle in the proverbial haystack of the Western Front? His first drink on French soil procured him a French soldier's uniform. He spoke French well, with a good accent. His English was heavily accented. To speak it here would result in him being lynched as the Hun.

He caught a train to Amiens, where he took a room at a pension with a friendly landlady. The town crawled with French and British soldiers. In his pocket, he carried a photo of Lucas that he had persuaded his wife to part with. In it, Lucas had reached a state of manhood Johann had never imagined. He was thirty-five, his golden hair cut severely short. If it was possible, he had grown even more beautiful. He showed the picture to his landlady, who shook her head.

The weather in France did not agree with Johann. It was twilight next day before he ventured out.

British soldiers marched down the Amiens-Albert road. Over the hill billowed plumes of smoke, and he heard the distant sound of gunfire. Even in this tranquil town, it wasn't easy to forget they were a few miles from the front line.

Johann fell into step with a few of the men and asked if anyone spoke French.

One said yes and offered him a cigarette, which he declined.

"Do you know this man? He's from London."

"No, we're the Manchester Regiment. Try the Fifty-Sixth Division. Not many left after the first day, though."

Johann swallowed. All he knew about the first day of the Somme battle was that thousands and thousands of British had fallen.

"Do you know where they'd be now?"

The man shrugged. "I wouldn't get your hopes up." Then he looked apologetic.

“What do you want him for, anyway?”

“He did me a charitable deed once. I want to repay him.”

“Sorry, mate. Hope you find him.”

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Johann watched the men continue on. When the road was beginning to empty, he followed at a distance.

A field hospital set up behind the lines was like a horror show. The amount of blood on display made Johann nauseous rather than thirsty. Men sat on the ground outside, their heads bandaged, faces covered in blood. Other men with missing limbs were bandaged quickly and given morphine. Inside a makeshift tent, a man was screaming as his leg was amputated.

They weren't just British. French and German soldiers were being treated here, too. Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders. Bodies covered with canvas lay on the ground. Stacks of rifles were neatly stored in one corner. Packs belonging to the dead in another.

This evidence of what humanity was capable of made Johann glad he was no longer one of them. He sank down on the grass next to a German prisoner.

“Are you injured?” a British medic asked him in French.

Johann shook his head. He retrieved the photo from his pocket. “I'm looking for this man. His name's Lucas Seymour, a doctor from London.”

The man nodded. “I know him. He went to the front to treat the men they couldn't bring back. Dangerous *and* futile. But he didn't care. He's a brave chap.”

Johann brought his knees up and leaned his chin on them, looking at the photo. All the hopes he'd nurtured that Lucas was safely behind the front line were for nothing. Perhaps Lucas had the same death wish Johann once had. He thanked

the man, and the medic went away. Darkness had fully fallen, and Johann lay back and looked at the stars. Whether alive or dead, he was only a few miles from his beloved. They were here together, on the same bloodstained soil, perhaps for the last time.

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## **Chapter Fifteen**

The vampire Johann walked slowly through the desperate theater that was No Man's Land. In the relative calm before dawn, the shelling had stopped, and the only light came from the moon. The ground was strewn with bodies, some in pieces. Some moved, crawling, still trying to get to the German trenches. A sniper picked them off at intervals, clean shots ringing through the night.

The air was far from silent. It was filled with the entreaties of the mortally wounded. A hand clutched at his ankle. Johann looked down to see a boy with golden hair. It wasn't Lucas. This soldier was fifteen years younger than Lucas, closer to that boy Johann remembered from times long past. The innocent hours of sitting in the university quad while Lucas's face lit up at the present Johann had bought him.

"Please," the boy asked, "help me."

Johann knelt down. The ground was baked hard from the sun. The boy lay on his back, a hole in his torso where part of his ribcage had been blown away, his blood leaking steadily onto the French soil. The boy groped for Johann's hand, and he held it, looking down into his eyes.

"It's all right," he told the British soldier. "Don't be afraid. I'm here."

The boy nodded, and his frightened tears slowed. He gulped in breath, and his body slumped into abrupt relaxation, as though with relief. As though he had been given permission to die. "Don't leave me."

"I won't."

Johann sat holding the boy's hand, squeezing it, stroking it with his other until the boy's eyes slipped shut and his frantically beating heart let go its tenuous hold on life.

Johann imagined he saw the boy's soul go free, over the poppy fields of France and back toward England. He stood up and moved on.

Soldiers lay half-buried in earth, their graves already begun, perhaps the only graves they would know. Others had dragged themselves into shell holes and lay

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wounded and dying. Two men embraced, one begging the other to give his love to his wife and baby daughter, while the second reassured him that he would.

Someone called to Johann, asked him what the hell he thought he was doing, and did he want to get his head shot off? Johann was sure a shot to the head wouldn't kill him, but decapitation probably would so he flattened himself anyway, crawling along the ground like everyone else.

It was there, after hours of searching, with the knees of his uniform torn and his hands bloodied, that Johann finally found his love.

It was the gleam of Lucas's golden hair in the moonlight that led Johann to the shell hole. Lucas lay at the bottom, in an inch of muddy water, contorted in a ball, his hands pressed furiously to his abdomen, gasping softly with every breath he took.

Johann dropped lightly into the hole and crouched over him. Lucas's eyes were closed, his face covered in a light sheen of sweat and ghastly white, mirroring every other face Johann had seen there that night. Johann smelled blood. Lucas's hands were covered in it, and he held himself as though trying to keep something inside.

Johann knew he was mortally wounded, and anguish gripped him so hard he shook with it. He leaned over Lucas, stroking damp, dirty, golden hair.

"Lucas, my love."

Lucas's eyes flicked open. He stared in abject shock. Then he started to laugh.

"Oh, I'm dreaming you."

Johann shook his head. "No. I'm here."

Lucas stifled a sob. One hand left his wound to grip at Johann's uniform and pull him close. "You wear a French soldier's uniform," he said, almost in amusement.

"My disguise." Johann smiled gently. He stripped off his jacket and ripped off the sleeve, wadding it up. Drawing Lucas's hand away from his abdomen to look, he saw the wound, glistening wet and almost black in the darkness. Johann pressed the makeshift dressing to it and pushed Lucas's hand back to hold it in place. He sat down and pulled Lucas into his arms, cradling him on his lap.

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Lucas stared up at him as Johann stroked his hair. "You came all the way here to this horror, for me. Why would you?"

"Because I love you."

Tears trickled from Lucas's pale, silvery eyes. He tried to smile. "Remember when I held you this way? When I gave you the blood."

"Of course. You saved my life. You saved it twice. That time the cellist with the knife tried to kill me."

"Have you come to save mine?"

Johann let the question hang in the air for a long while. His fingertips touched Lucas's cheek. How wonderfully smooth and boyish his skin still was. So pale and without blemish; delicate lines beginning under his eyes and around his mouth which merely made him more beautiful. More alive. Had he come to save Lucas's life? Was he going to let him go without a fight?

"If you want me to."

Lucas's face crumpled, and he wept heavily. Johann drew his head to his breast and held him close. "Don't. I'm here."

"I'm dying."

"I know, my love. Don't be afraid."

Lucas's tears soaked through his shirt. His hand gripped Johann's shoulder fiercely. "If you only knew how full of regret I am."

Johann pressed his lips to Lucas's damp forehead. "About what?"

"About you. The way I never gave myself to you when I should have."

Johann was broken in two. He held onto Lucas's so humanly fragile body and felt the blood leaking from it searing his own skin. "No, my love."

Lucas lifted his head, earnest, tear-filled eyes fixed on his. "Why didn't you kill me? That time at the hospital, when you bit me? Why didn't you take it all?"

"You know I would never...." A bullet whistled across the shell hole, and there was a thud and a cry as a man fell above them.

"But I told you that you could have me."

Johann didn't reply. He drowned in oceans of regret. That it would come to this. Lucas dying in his arms, after all those needless years spent apart. He should have been selfish and damned the consequences. He should have taken what he  
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wanted and not listened to the all too human conscience he still possessed. He should have killed Lucas years ago.

He cupped Lucas's face with one hand, and finally took what he had always wanted above all else. He leaned down and kissed his love.

Lucas sighed softly as their lips clung together in the sweetest kiss Johann had

ever known. He had imagined this moment many times in the last sixteen years, but none of his fantasies did it justice. Lucas's mouth was an unearthly sweetness in Johann's ocean of dark, destructive days. It spoke to him of hope, of light, of new beginnings. Behind his closed eyes, he imagined fields of poppies waving in the summer breeze, thousands of men buried beneath unnamed crosses.

Their lips parted. Lucas stared up into his eyes. "I feel no pain," he told Johann.

Johann pressed him closer. Lucas's body trembled rhythmically with shock, his skin cold and clammy. He was moments away. Johann closed his eyes a moment and fought back his grief. Tried to think clearly for the first time in sixteen years. The only thing he saw was the yawning abyss before him.

"I can't let you go," he burst out as the blood tears swam in his eyes and dropped onto Lucas's face. "Don't make me."

Lucas's hand found his, clung tight. He shook his head. "Take me."

They stared at each other for only a moment before Johann pulled Lucas's collar open. As he reached inside, something burned his hand and he drew it back with a hiss of pain. Lucas still wore the crucifix.

"Take it off," Johann whispered. "If you want this, take it off."

Lucas did not hesitate. He reached up and pulled the necklace free with one hand, snapping the chain, discarding it into the bottom of the shell hole, and then he fell back, exhausted. His eyes rolled back in his head, and his breathing slowed.

Johann shook him. "Lucas."

There was no reply. Lucas was unconscious, and Johann heard his weakly beating heart beginning to slow. He bent forward, face against the cold skin of Lucas's neck, feeling the pulse against his lips. Above them, the sky was lit up by a sudden explosion, and the earth beneath them rocked.

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“My love, forgive me for what I do.” Johann sank his teeth deep into the moribund skin, and as the blood spurted into his mouth in pitiful fits and starts, he felt the exact moment at which Lucas’s heart stopped.

Johann cried out, breaking his mouth from the wound. The body lay limp in his arms, Lucas’s soul already gone, and the blood sour and cool in his mouth.

For a moment, Johann only wanted to lie with his love in his arms and weep until he was done, but he forced himself on. Forced himself to take what he had always wanted, and now wanted no more.

It was an effort to draw every mouthful, with Lucas’s heart not providing the push. The blood settled leaden in his stomach, chilling Johann from the inside out, but he kept going, even though he thought the act might kill him.

He drank until Lucas was empty, body and soul gone, and then he cradled him once more and held him for a long time, rocking him slowly and whispering his love.

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## Chapter Sixteen

It was dawn when Johann climbed out of the shell hole with Lucas in his arms.

He walked across No Man’s Land, holding the dead body, picking his way carefully across the debris, taking his time. A sniper shot him in the back as he walked alongside the British trench. He fell, crushing Lucas beneath him, lay there a suitable time, then got up and continued his progress.

Voices called to him from the British trench, but he ignored them, making for the woods. He was bleeding, but the wound was closing rapidly after his meal.

Lucas showed no signs of awakening, and Johann had no experience of how long it usually took. He had never loved anyone enough to make them into a



vampire.

Which was a cruelty in itself, because surely if he *really* loved someone, he *wouldn't* make them into a vampire. But letting Lucas go would have been finally letting himself go, and after Lucas died in that shell hole, Johann would have had to lie out in the July sun until it took him to join his beloved. He had committed the ultimate in selfish acts to keep Lucas with him. He hoped his love did not despise him for the rest of eternity.

The sky was pink and radiant, bathing Lucas's pasty face in the coyest of blushes. Johann felt the kiss still burning his lips as he carried Lucas through the trees, seeking a road that would lead him out of here.

"Stop."

Johann turned his head at the sound of his own language. A German soldier faced him, rifle held aloft, bayonet in fixed position. Johann guessed that the bullets couldn't do much but the bayonet could decapitate him nicely. Lucas would be left to fend for himself, a new vampire in a cruel, war-torn world.

In a split-second, he defected. "I'm one of you," he said, in German.

"What?"

"I'm Austrian. From Vienna."

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The German, a young man of about thirty, curled his lip. The pink light shone off the spike on his helmet. "What the hell are you doing wearing a French uniform?"

"It's a long story."

"I'm not sure I believe you. Why are you carrying a British soldier?"

"He's wounded. I'm taking him for treatment."

“Wounded? He’s dead, you fool.”

Johann looked down at Lucas in mock-surprise. “No, he isn’t.”

“He is. Do you know how to feel for a pulse? Check his.”

“Then I’m taking him to the British, so they can identify and bury him. Have you so completely lost your humanity that you’re going to stop me?”

The German soldier was taken aback, and for a moment Johann saw the flicker of deep suffering in his eyes. All he had endured since coming to France. Then he tightened his hold on his rifle and leveled it at Johann’s head. “I can’t let you pass. You’re wearing an enemy uniform, helping an enemy soldier. What am I supposed to think?”

“You’re a soldier. I wasn’t aware it was your job to think.”

The German didn’t like that at all. He squeezed off a shot that hit the ground in front of Johann, blowing up a cloud of dust.

Johann remained calm. “Look, let me go. Who am I going to tell?”

“Plenty of people.”

Johann laughed scornfully. “You’re an idiot. We’re all living on borrowed time.

I’ve as much chance of being killed before I deliver this man to safety as I have of staying alive. Do you think either of us are ever going to see home again?”

This worked. The soldier started to cry, wiping his eyes roughly and fiercely with the back of one hand. “Don’t speak to me like that. I have a wife and two sons at home.”

“I’m sorry, but you signed up for this. You signed up for mindless murder and mass slaughter, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“No? How many men have you killed so far?”

The man didn't answer. He lowered his rifle and leaned back against a tree.

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Johann crouched down and rested Lucas's weight on the ground. "Why don't I be honest with you? I came to France from New York to find this man. Now I've found him, I don't ever want to let him go again."

The soldier looked confused.

"I'm a vampire," Johann clarified.

The soldier blanched. "Don't be ridiculous."

Johann smiled. "Why else would I be wandering around France dressed in a French soldier's uniform and holding a British soldier? I found him dying. I drank his blood and turned him into a vampire."

The soldier gave a cry of disgust. "You're a necrophiliac, aren't you? That's what you are."

"I hesitate to use that word, myself," Johann said in amusement.

The German soldier lifted his rifle again. "We'll see if you're a vampire or not."

He shot Johann in the left shoulder.

Johann fell back onto the ground. He panted a little in pain, resting his hand on the wet wound. Then he gathered his strength, lifted Lucas and walked forward through the trees.

"Come back here," shouted the soldier furiously.

"You'll have to kill me if it's really so important to you to stop me," Johann told him over his wounded shoulder.

A shot whistled past his head. Still, Johann kept walking. In his arms, Lucas stirred, thick lashes trembling on his pale cheeks. Johann's dead heart clenched

in relief, excitement, and a measure of regret. A bullet embedded itself in his left thigh. He stumbled, but continued to walk. Above him, he heard birdsong.

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## Chapter Seventeen

Under dawn's chorus, Johann sat against a wall on the outskirts of a farm, holding Lucas in his arms. His cold skin was warm again, and color had returned to his blue-tinged cheeks. He moved his head from side to side and his hands twitched, before he opened his eyes and looked up at Johann.

Johann smiled gently and hesitantly.

Lucas looked over the blackened, destroyed landscape. "I'm still in France," he said tonelessly.

"Yes."

Lucas's pale eyes moved back to his. "Am I dead?"

Johann nodded solemnly.

Lucas held his gaze silently for a long while, then slowly his face relaxed into a smile. "Good."

Johann was astonished. "Just so we're clear, Lucas, I took your life and made you into a vampire."

"You *saved* my life," Lucas pointed out. "You saved me from this nightmare."

He gestured to the ruined French countryside. "I'm one of the lucky ones."

Silence reigned once more.

"So you forgive me?"

"You showed admirable restraint for sixteen years."

“Answer the question.”

“Yes, I do.”

Johann sighed. He lifted Lucas off his lap and stood up. He paced a little and ran his hand through his hair, dislodging dirt and dust. “Oh, my love, I’ve condemned you to a miserable life in the dark and on the run. How does it feel to know that if you don’t seek shelter within the next half hour, you’ll burn to ashes?”

Lucas regarded him. He stood up, his uniform stiff with dried blood. He lifted his tunic and shirt and looked beneath at the abdominal wound that was now a

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faint smudge of dark color. “You’ve condemned me to a life with *you*,” he told Johann. “My dream for the last sixteen years.” He put his arms around Johann’s neck.

Johann felt suddenly weak with joy, such an alien emotion that he could only cling to Lucas mutely, almost too shocked to take in the fact that Lucas did not blame him or hate him for what he had done.

Lucas drew back. His smile was shy, and it infected Johann. He brushed his fingertips over one blood and dirt-encrusted cheek. “Let’s ask for a room here.”

“We have no things and we’re filthy. They’ll think we’re deserters.”

“So?”

“I haven’t got any money.”

“I have. Let’s go.” Johann entwined their fingers and pulled him toward the farm. Lucas held on tight. As he walked, he looked up at the sky as though savoring the sunrise for the last time. Johann’s heart constricted with regret.

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The room was dominated by a large bed, which Johann eyed with unease. In the bathroom, the tin tub stood full with steaming water. In the mirror, he caught sight of pale, naked limbs as Lucas sank into the water with a sigh.

Johann closed the curtains. He peeled his clothes off and piled them in the corner. He looked at the bullet wounds on his shoulder and thigh. Then he sat on the bed and waited for his turn in the bath.

“Johann?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Come in here.”

Johann put a towel around his waist and went into the bathroom. The water was grubby, and Lucas’s skin was pink. He held out a sponge. “Will you wash me?” Their gazes held for the longest while.

Johann took the sponge with an unsteady hand. He lathered up a bar of soap.

Lucas leaned forward.

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Johann soaped his shoulders and neck and lathered his hair. He rinsed him with clean water, which stood in a bucket nearby. He knelt at the head of the bath and inhaled the scent of clean skin.

Slowly, reverently, he pressed his mouth to one wet shoulder. Lucas shuddered at the touch of his lips. Johann caressed his neck, captured his earlobe in his mouth.

“Johann,” Lucas whispered. “Can I drink from you?”

The blood burned hot in Johann’s veins. “Yes, Lucas.”

Lucas turned around in the bath to look at him. “Get in.”

Johann hesitated only a moment before he let the towel drop and climbed into

the bath. He sat with his back to his love, Lucas's arms around him. He tilted his head back, neck presented.

Lucas washed him first, soaping him all over. Then he mouthed Johann's neck, kissing delicately.

Johann sank into his embrace, trembling in ecstasy as the fangs penetrated him and Lucas groaned in pleasure at the first sweet taste of blood. This was their communion, their meeting, the swearing of their allegiance to each other. They were now blood of each other's blood, and from this, all would follow.

Lucas swallowed hard. His hands brought Johann back close so he could impale him ever deeper.

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The curtains were heavy, the room dark. Birdsong nearly drowned out the sound of rifles and shelling. In the big bed, the two vampires slumbered beneath the covers, spooned together, skin to skin, as they finally started their long journey together. This moment Johann never dared to dream would come.

Lucas turned over in his arms. He pressed his lips to Johann's, and they kissed slowly, deeply, with a passion made flesh from an impossible hope.

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~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

*Scarlet likes cats and hats and firmly believes that the only thing better than one attractive man is two attractive men.*

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